

THE MARCO POLO ODYSSEY: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A MERCHANT WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

By Harry Rutstein

SYNOPSIS

When the Royal Geographical Society informed me that no one had ever completed Marco Polo's overland route from Europe to China, I was determined to be the first to retrace Marco Polo's original trek. My ten-year journey became an exhilarating voyage of discovery spanning vast deserts and the world's highest mountains, following Marco Polo's footsteps across all of Asia. For the next decade, I would travel along the same roads as this famous Venetian, the man whose book and foreign discoveries launched globalization.

The Marco Polo Odyssey is an account of my three expeditions following the great explorer's path. It includes historical commentaries, geographical descriptions, and cultural accounts along the now-abandoned Silk Road. Excerpts from Marco Polo's Description of the World are interspersed throughout my book, authenticating his journey and confirming how little has changed in seven hundred years. My story shows how it was Polo's work that initiated direct trade between the East and West and expanded the mercantile empires of medieval Europe.

FIRST EXPEDITION

The team of my first expedition consisted of Joanne Kroll, a cultural anthropologist; my nineteen-year-old son Rick, who was the same age Marco had been when he traveled with his father; and myself, an international merchant of high technology. The three of us arrived in Venice, Italy, in July 1975. We stayed in the original Polo family home—now a small hotel and pizza parlor—before sailing to Israel to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. After a brief incarceration by the police in Cyprus, we again crossed a stormy Mediterranean, this time in a floundering 40-foot sailboat that at one point lacked both sails and power. With incredible luck, our small entourage of explorers reached the shores of Turkey to begin our land trek, which would span across the entire continent of Asia.

Rediscovering the lost city of Ayas, Turkey, was a challenge. This was where Polo landed on his seagoing journey from Israel. Our travels took us through exotic Cappadocia and past Mt. Ararat as we continued on our path to Iran. We plowed our way through the unbearable heat of the Iranian deserts in a small motorcar, making our way to the world's most beautiful city, Isfahan, and then south to the Persian Gulf. An dilapidated off-roads bus took us and some other nomads back to the North following the Polos through the great salt and sand deserts of Central Iran to the border of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan in 1975 seemed to have experienced little change over the centuries, giving us the opportunity to relive Marco Polo's adventures in this Islamic nation first hand. As "non-believers" in a fanatical Islamic area of Afghanistan, we were twice threatened with decapitation as we navigated our way through its northern deserts. Here, we left no track, as we traversed sand so fine it acted more as water in our wake. The nature of the barren sands made travel by anything other than camels or fat-wheeled trucks impossible. Ahead, new snow covered the Hindu Kush Mountain passes, stopping us from continuing into Pakistan and further to the Chinese border.

At this point, mountains and politics made the continuing along Polo's trail impossible, and the expedition returned to America. We had been traveling for four months.

SECOND EXPEDITION

After years of effort, visas to enter China remained unattainable. I was drawn, however, to a three-hundred-mile mountainous segment of the Marco Polo itinerary in Northern Pakistan. In 1981, I organized a film expedition to cross the highest cluster of mountains in the world. We started where we ended our previous journey in the Hindu Kush at the

Afghan-Pakistan border, and worked our way through the Karakoram Mountains into the province of Hunza. Hunza is deeply secluded from modern culture, providing a mountainous home to many of the oldest people on earth. Our five-man film crew produced a motion picture portraying these sturdy Islamic people and the treacherous mountains in which they live. We trekked from Afghanistan to the Kun Lun Mountains of China by foot, jeep, horse, and a goatskin raft, which was made up of blown-up carcasses and helped us to cross fast-moving rivers.

Although the shortest of the three expeditions, our adventure in Northern Pakistan provided enduring images. We documented this rugged trek with its remote mountain-scapes in a film entitled *On the Roof of the World* with Marco Polo. The movie was first shown with my lecture at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1982.

THIRD EXPEDITION

With the help of then Vice President George H. W. Bush and high-ranking Chinese officials, I finally won China's official government approval to cross that country's western border. On August 15, 1985, at the 16,350-foot Khunjerab Pass, I became the first foreigner to officially enter the People's Republic of China through its western boundary since it had been closed in 1949.

Four of the senior photographers of the China News Service joined me on this third and last expedition. In addition to the Chinese, Michael Winn—a photojournalist who had photographed our Pakistan expedition and whose stories and pictures on that project appeared in the *Smithsonian*, *Adventure Travel*, and other publications—helped make up our team of photographers, explorers, and Chinese officials.

Just like the secluded regions of Central Asia that we'd visited on earlier expeditions, Western China had not changed since Marco Polo was there; in fact, we could have used his book as a travel guide. The Old Silk Road that Polo followed along the southern rim of the Taklamakan Desert in Western China had been abandoned in the sixteenth century. It stretches across 1,500 miles of devastating sand, with few people and few roads. Marco Polo went this way, and I followed him seven centuries later, by way of camels, farm tractors, and jeeps. Beyond the Taklamakan was the Gobi. This led us through Gansu Province to Inner Mongolia and then to Coleridge's Xanadu, the summer palace of the Kublai Khan.

On October 23, 1985, the expedition ended safely with a great celebration in Beijing, China. That day, I sat triumphantly on the Marco Polo Bridge, my dream fulfilled. It had been one hell of a journey.

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